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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a rationale for including aesthetic education in the traditional elementary and secondary curriculum. By teaching students to perceive images as artists do and to make images as artists do, aesthetic education fosters imaginative perception and sensitivity to a broad range of feelings. Four factors contribute to the need for aesthetic education: (1) A citizenry uneducated in the forms of feelings is vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation. (2) Because the modern world is vastly interdependent, it is vital to understand other cultures; one of the most direct routes to learning is through the arts, which display the deepest concerns of a culture and the way the world is perceived by a culture. (3) It is the right of every child to examine the fine arts; aesthetic education should not be elitist. (4) Most important, aesthetic education creates an area in which imagination can transcend social and technological barriers to thought, action, and feeling. At the elementary level, students should acquire a familiarity with a variety of performance and creative skills. At the secondary level, students can be introduced to aesthetic criticism or the skills of viewing works of art as the artist and critic perceive them. Teachers can integrate aesthetic education into the classroom through creative workshops, arts programs, or an exploration of themes or historical styles. (KC)

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The Whys and Hows of Aesthetic Education

by

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Preface

Several years ago CEMREL launched an extensive teacher education program. The purpose of the program was to train teachers in the art of teaching aesthetics. It was as part of that effort that this paper was originally written. The paper serves as an introduction to aesthetic education for teachers, administrators, parents and other interested members of the public. It presents a rationale for the inclusion of an aesthetic education in the schooling of every child in today's society.

"The Whys and Hows of Aesthetic Education" will eventually appear as part of a methods text on aesthetic education, currently being written by practitioners in the field.

Few citizens would quarrel with the need to teach all children to read, write, and reckon, as well as to know modest amounts of science, history, geography, and literature, for it is hard to see how a modern technological society can function properly with a population deficient in these intellectual accomplishments.

There is also general agreement that attitudes favorable to the community's preference in social and moral values should be inculcated in schools by instruction, exhortation, and example. If there is disagreement, it will be about the particular values and attitudes to be taught, and as sentiment in favor of cultural pluralism grows, such disagreements may become sharper and more numerous.

The Aesthetic Domain

However, between the cognitive/intellectual domain on one side and the emotional/dispositional one on the other lies a third territory. It is the aesthetic aspect of experience. This aspect is not the exclusive property of the head or the heart, but rather that of imagination and perception which unites the two. The aesthetic object, whether found in nature and the environment or created by an artist, reveals to our senses the faces of feeling--images in paint and stone, in sounds and words, in human gestures and postures. Whenever we concentrate attention on the appearance of houses,

dress, sea shells, faces, automobiles, or on the dramatic structure of events and actions, we are responding aesthetically. In cognitive and practical perception, on the contrary, we attend to those features of the object that help us understand and use it, e.g., to know that a dress is made of wool tells us that it should be worn in winter and that it has to be cleaned rather than washed.

We can think of the aesthetic domain as including our experience with the appearances of natural objects and contrived ones, and among the latter, those created for non-aesthetic uses and those created primarily for their aesthetic effects, i.e., works of art. And among the art objects, some are the projects of popular arts, enjoyed by virtually everyone without special study; and some might be called serious or cultivated art and usually do require study for their appreciation. The distinction is not always easy to make, but we do need to distinguish between art works that have been considered worthy of continued study and preservation and those that are made for entertainment and advertising, or as adjuncts to a wide variety of commercial uses. The distinction is important because art that can be appropriated without instruction need not be made part of the curriculum. At least, it might be difficult to persuade school boards to include it in required programs of study.

About the aesthetic domain, the attitude of the citizenry in this country is ambivalent. On the one hand, the citizen does not ordinarily

think of himself as an artist or a patron of the serious arts, but he recognizes that museums, concert orchestras, opera, and literature are important cultural products and ought to be cherished and supported--although not necessarily by himself. He feels no great urgency to become knowledgeable about the arts in the way that he feels obliged to know something about the three r's, science, history, etc. Nevertheless, he favors some instruction in "drawing" and music in the elementary grades, if there is time left over from the study of the solid or basic subjects. Arts education, it is fair to say, is classed among the desirable but nonessential components of the school program.

The same citizens, on the other hand, when buying a car, a house, clothing, household appliances, or when sweating over lawns and hedges on sunny Saturdays, are very much concerned with the appearance of things. They watch televison and go to sleep with images of the good, the true, and the beautiful dancing in their heads. These persuasive images in sound, color, and words were concocted by image-makers in the employ of those who have something to sell--whether it be the virtues of a breakfast food or the virtues of a candidate for political office. Images form feelings; feelings predispose behavior; and nobody denies the importance of behavior. Feelings are affected not only by the images created by advertising but also by the values celebrated in the images created by popular music, painting, poetry, fiction, dancing, and film. Serious art creates images that affect feelings, also, but to a much lesser

extent than do the images of the popular arts.

So we have the paradoxical attitude of the citizen toward the aesthetic domain. His behavior is witness to the importance of the aesthetic dimension of life, but he does not see it as an important part of education. Serious art that requires study and cultivation he respects but does not use; the kind he uses, appreciates, and enjoys he does not have to study.

Need for Aesthetic Education

But in a world such as ours, can commerce with images be left to take care of itself for most of our people, and its cultivation confined to an elite group of art connoisseurs? At least four kinds of circumstance lead one to doubt it.

1. If, as seems to be the case, our actions both as individuals and as citizens are so deeply influenced by feelings and the images of feelings, then to become sensitive to the possibilities of feeling in every department of life qualifies as an important goal for schooling. For the most direct and efficacious route to attitudes is through the images provided by the arts, so that a citizenry uneducated in the forms of feeling is as vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation as one that is unschooled in mathematics, science, and history--perhaps even more so.
2. In an interdependent world the understanding of many cultures is

no longer a luxury. This is true for cultures in lands other than our own and also for diverse cultures in our own population. But how do we come to understand and "get inside," so to speak, a culture markedly different from our own? Living in it for a long time is one way; learning its language and customs and traditions is another. Yet one of the most direct routes is through its arts, for the arts display in vivid form the deepest concerns of a culture and how the world is perceived in that culture. Aesthetic education may yield quicker and more reliable results in producing international understanding than some of the ploys that have been tried.

Part of the difficulty in adapting American schooling to the children of the inner city and of some ethnic minorities lies in the insufficient facility of these children in the use of the standard English dialect. That difficulty may not be overcome merely by more drill in the language arts, if the imagery of these children is markedly different from that of the school. Their father, mother, hero images, for example, may be different even when the words evoke the same dictionary definition. Often it is only through the songs, stories, slang, jokes, legends of the group that one discovers the representational meaning of its vocabulary.

3. The existence and persistence of the fine arts in the various media and the study and care that have been lavished on them

for centuries make one wonder whether an education that has not felt the influence of this tradition is adequate. Is such cultivation only for the elite or is it, like good science or good history or good mathematics, the right of every child? Unless the rhetoric of educators and legislators is a plain lie, the answer is clear.

4. Aesthetic experience may well be one of the few areas of life in which one does not have to count the cost of every satisfaction in terms of economic, vocational, or political constraints. In this sense, aesthetic experience creates freedom-space. Freedom-space is that area of life in which imagination can transcend the customary barriers to thought, feeling, and action; and surely it is not necessary to dwell on the need for freedom-space in a tightly interdependent technological society. Sanity may depend on it.

The quest for identity, the feelings of alienation, the threat of an impersonal computerized social system--these by now are familiar results of the diminution of freedom-space. By shrewd calculation and ingenuity, one can moderate the forces that compress that space. However, the need for freedom and individuality cannot be fully satisfied by action--at least not by most of us. It has to be expanded in another way.

Insofar as the realm of the aesthetic is the realm of appearance enjoyed for its own sake, it demands no commitment to action. Flights of fancy, therefore, can be misused to escape from reality, but art disciplines imagination so that it reveals the import of reality without inexorably embroiling us in its forces and counterforces. The great tragedies of Greek drama display the meaning of human passions and their consequences without forcing us to relive them. A poem by Wordsworth or a painting by Cezanne gives us an insight into nature that plowing hundreds of acres may not.

Aesthetic Imagination

To warrant a place in the curriculum of general education, aesthetic education should emphasize what the customary contents of that curriculum do not, i.e., imaginative perception or perceptive imagination. When one perceives red and green lights as signals to stop or go, perception is functioning cognitively and practically, i.e., perception is receiving and interpreting information as a guide to action. When the same lights are perceived as the eyes of an angry and serene spirit respectively, they are being perceived imaginatively, as images of feeling.

Imagination conjures up all sorts of images in all sorts of combinations. However, visual images of an angry sea, or word images of a magic mountain, or sound images of death and hope in a requiem mass are the products of perceptive imagination. For these are images

that make inner human feeling and import perceptible to the senses. Very early in the human game, men probably perceived in trees, rivers, mountains, and animals the images of good and evil spirits, because these objects looked or sounded good or evil, promising or threatening, powerful or weak. These were imaginative perceptions, and out of them, one may guess, came the impulse to capture these portents in some objective form--in art.

Aesthetic Skills

Aesthetic education can be regarded as an education which teaches the student to perceive images as artists do (aesthetic impression) and to make images as artists do (aesthetic expression). The skills of aesthetic expression are performance and/or creative skills: one learns how to paint, dance, write poetry, sing. The skills of aesthetic impression consist of habits of viewing works of art in various media the way artists and critics tend to perceive them. The artist differs from the non-artist in the way he perceives in being able to give form to sensory materials or to see form in them that most of us do not see. The traditional school programs in music and art are examples of trying to form the skills of aesthetic expression; courses in arts appreciation are the conventional examples of trying to develop the skills of impression.

Why have these programs not succeeded in drawing arts education into the center of the general education curriculum? Why are these programs

the first to suffer the economy pinch? Why are they still, for the most part, electives--and not always the most popular electives--in the secondary school?

For one thing, most adults do not practice the arts as performers or creators. Although as little children they may have had little hesitation in using paint, crayons, song, and gestures to express whatever it was they wanted to express, before the end of the elementary school years this aesthetic confidence seemed to shrink in the face of the concern about "doing it right." Since doing it right calls for some talent and hard work, most adolescents have discontinued participation in the conventional performance art courses. As a result, most adults, as far as aesthetic expression is concerned, are virtually illiterate.

For the child with talent and strong motivation, performance courses should always be available in as great variety and quality as resources permit. They may identify a potential vocational career or an important avocation. Quite properly, such courses stress competence and standards in artistic expression. In general education, however, performance has a somewhat different goal, viz., to make the learner familiar with the technical and expressive properties of the various media in order to develop the skills of artistic impression. That the learner also enjoys the creative process on its own account is a welcome dividend for which no other justification is necessary.

The conventional appreciation course in music, art, literature and other arts suffers from a somewhat different disability. Because so much of it is talk about works of art, usually the great masterpieces, and because it tries to make art movements, developments, and styles intelligible to the novice, the result is likely to be some familiarity with certain works of art, plus a set of standards which, valid though they may be, are not authentic standards. They do not, as a rule, emerge from the student's direct experience with the works of art or from his reflection about the properties that make them good in the eyes of the artist or the experienced critic. They teach, at best, the proper things to say about authenticated works of art; at worst, they make one anxious about saying the proper things.

For general aesthetic education, performance standards need to be relaxed from those used by the artist and critic; whereas for skills of impression, the standards of the layman and those of artist and critic can be and should be much closer.

Finally, the conventional course of either the performance or the appreciation sort usually concentrates on one art, although some humanities courses range over a variety of the media. For general use, however, skill in perceiving in all the arts and a modicum of confidence (not necessarily expertise) in using some of them for expression is a more reasonable goal. One would expect more scope

for creativity in the arts of expression in the earlier grades and more emphasis on the skills of perception in the later ones.

At this point it might be objected that talking about aesthetic education as skills of impression takes most of the glamour out of the aesthetic experience and deprives art of its honorific status in the culture. Is aesthetic education, one might ask, no different from learning to read and write save that the learner must use a different set of symbols?

In a limited sense, it is not. Images express and communicate, but they do so differently in the various arts; each art has its own vocabulary, so to speak. Lines, colors, gestures are not like letters in an alphabet or even like syllables in a word or, indeed, even like individual words. Furthermore, there are no rules of grammar or syntax that determine the structure of works of art. The skills of expression are more like the skills of a craftsman, and the skills of impression are more like the know-how of the sports spectator who knows what to look for or listen for. One does not watch hockey with the same expectations as one brings to baseball; one does not listen to symphonic music as one examines paintings or sculpture.

These skills can be taught and improved, but they are only the vestibules to the aesthetic experience. What one finds at the end of the passage depends on what the artist has contrived and the way

in which our own experience resonates to it. Yet for the expressive power of the object to work on us, the skills of aesthetic impression are extraordinarily useful and, for some works of art, indispensable.

One way of making aesthetic instruction systematic is to teach the pupil to notice certain aspects of the object, event, or experience in ways that approximate those of the artist and critic. This is quite possible in at least three dimensions: the sensory, technical, and formal. The sensory properties are the sound, colors, textures, and movements out of which the artist composes the work of art.

Formal properties can also be studied more or less systematically. The formal properties of a work of art sometimes refer to the general composition of design; e.g., the concerto or the rondo in music, the sonnet in poetry. More generally, form is the organization of the sensory properties determining how they affect each other: whether they balance, set up tensions and contrasts; how they direct the attention and the interest of the observer.

The technical properties, or the way the artist achieved or didn't achieve certain effects, are important to the artist and the critic, and should be important to the educated layman. For although techniques in art, as in cosmetics, should not be obtrusive and are only instrumental in producing the final aesthetic object, nevertheless each medium has its peculiar technical advantages and limitations.

The control we have over aesthetic education in these three dimensions we do not have over a fourth, and for the layman the most important one, viz., the expressive aspect of aesthetic objects, that is, what the work of art says or means. One can only hope that if the person is competent in perceiving the first three, the fourth will also "happen." Whether he will be moved, amused, annoyed, or left yawning depends on the expressive power of the object and the sensitivity of the observer. The more like the artist he perceives in the first three dimensions, the more likely will he be to receive the kind of meaning that the artist or critic does.

Curriculum Design

Aesthetic education with the features enumerated here can take many curricular forms--creative workshops, related arts programs, studies of periods and styles, exploration of themes, etc. Nor is the variety of materials limited, although materials designed explicitly to facilitate the process save hours of time and fruitless experimenting.

On the elementary level, as has been noted, the curriculum can be tilted toward performance experimentation in as many of the arts as possible. The immediate aim is to broaden the sensitivity of the learner to the potentialities of the medium--of clay, paint, sounds, body movements, words, etc. Relatively unstructured activity programs of this sort are not uncommon in the visual media, but they could be extended to the musical, literary, dramatic,

and dance arts as well. The environment also affords opportunities for aesthetic experimentation. Yet even in an open, free activity program, the child can be led to awareness of the differences between the sensory, formal, technical, and expressive properties of the objects they create and perceive. Materials for instruction designed to bring out these properties can be expected to facilitate this awareness.

Elementary programs, however, need not be unstructured, and the degree of structure can be determined by the school or by the individual teacher. This factor, at this stage of the game, is less important than that the pupil acquire familiarity with a variety of media and confidence in using them for aesthetic purposes.

At the secondary level, the adolescents sorely need avenues of aesthetic expression at the very time when confidence in their technical competence for expression is ebbing. For most adolescents, it is safe to say, the use of ready-made art objects as a means of self expression is more likely than the creation of self-made objects. It is easier, for example, to find a poem that says what one feels than to write such a poem. It is the time for improving the aesthetic skills of impression, although standard courses in the performance arts should be available for those who want them.

The secondary school can introduce the student to aesthetic criticism, i.e., the making, understanding, and justifying of judgments about

aesthetic objects. While nobody can be denied the privilege of liking this or that work of art without giving reasons for liking it, judgments that purport to be objective, e.g., "Verdi's Requiem is superior to Beethoven's Missa Solemnis," do require reasons. The reasons are to be found in the history of art, in formal aesthetics, and in the literature of criticism. As a prospective educated layman, the student ought to know his way around in this field, although the goal of making him a connoisseur is hardly realistic.

One would hope that deeper probings into the field would be available to the student in the college years. Continuing and adult education offers to the public a chance to become competent in aesthetic skills and appreciation, and the widespread desire for such study testifies to the degree to which conventional schooling has neglected this need.

Curricula can be organized around themes (freedom, holiness), artistic styles (baroque, neo-classical, etc.), historical periods, or any combination of these. They can utilize contemporary arts, the classics, or materials designed especially for development of the skills of image making and image perceiving. Curricula can be adjusted to differences in age and cultural background. However, the more stable the design and the more uniform the vocabulary used to discuss it, the more flexible can the teacher be about materials and modes of instruction.

Outcomes of Aesthetic Education

Let us now return to the questions: Why should the school devote time and money for aesthetic education in view of the plentitude of popular art, the enjoyment of which needs no special training or study? Why should all children be asked to acquire the aesthetic skills? What benefits can be promised to the community, the individual, and the school itself?

The most general answer is that the range of feeling is as great as the discriminations we or the artist can make among them. The feeling tones associated with love or violence, for example, are virtually infinite. To be restricted by custom or habit to a small range of nuances of these feelings leads to crudity in judgment and perhaps in action as well. Civilization came about as the primitive drives needed for survival were transformed by imagination and thought into many shades and grades; it is thus that feeding becomes dining, lust becomes romance and devotion, and tribal unity becomes loyalty to causes and ideals. The cultivation of sensitivity to the range of feeling and the discriminations within it constitutes a much neglected but nevertheless fundamental phase of education.

This cultivation will not take place spontaneously or incidentally. The full range of feeling is not expressed by the popular arts nor by the fortuitous encounters of daily experience. For this purpose, the whole tradition of the fine arts is needed, just as the whole tradition of science is needed to infuse the population with the import and potentiality of scientific thought.

General education in the arts as in the other disciplines of instruction necessarily has to be non-specialized and incomplete. Even the best schools will not stock the pupil with specific learnings that at later dates can be retrieved and used as needed. The mind processes these inputs so that, when the occasion arises, certain forms of thought and feeling enable one to interpret and perceive with the residues of that input. And these permanent residues are precisely the sensitivity to sensory, formal, technical, and expressive properties of a work of art.

Aesthetic education thus enlarges the range of experience through perception of the arts and other aesthetic objects, but it also provides a means of expression for those who cannot themselves create aesthetic objects for this purpose. Aesthetic education opens up new and broader avenues of both impression and expression for these people because the work of art exhibits feelings they have never noted and provides expressions for feelings they have never been able to objectify.

Like those of general education, the effects of aesthetic education are unpredictable in detail, yet if it works at all it will manifest itself not only in our encounters with the arts but in all our transactions with life. So overriding have the scientific, economic, and political considerations in our lives become that aesthetic considerations have been ignored or postponed. But this may have been a mistake because the properties that make an object aesthetically

pleasing or interesting may be symptomatic of good functioning in all human activity. Certainly among the earliest clues to the breakdown of social and individual life is the aesthetic malaise they occasion.

A public educated aesthetically can be expected to think of all aspects of its community life in aesthetic as well as economic and political terms. This means not merely wishing that life be beautiful and the environment pleasant, but rather demanding that environment and community action have form and expressiveness. An environment or an action has form if it exhibits balance, contrast, rhythm, variations on a theme, and dramatic tension. There is a sense in which a community or a neighborhood that is aesthetically satisfying has a style that expresses the values of the people living in it. A community that grows by accretion, by trial and error satisfaction of this or that need, is likely to be an agglomeration rather than a community.

Although moral rightness and aesthetic rightness do not always coincide, very often their dissonance is a signal that something is wrong with the social system. Gross social inequality is not only morally repugnant and a form of ugliness, but it is obscene. Art can depict poverty and tragedy so as to reveal a redemptive quality in man; in a good community evil also must have some redemptive potentiality. Conflicts that simply destroy, repetitions that merely dull the mind, meaningless waste and complexity--these are all aesthetic deficiences as well as moral ones.

A school in which the aesthetic aspects of life are taken seriously will be a better school for all forms of learning. First, it will bring into play the resources of the imagination, which so often are allowed to languish in the cognitively preoccupied school. Second, it will open to the learner sources of intrinsic delight that are not available elsewhere. And third, the school itself, insofar as it takes on form and expressiveness, becomes an interesting social entity.

The benefits to the individual have already been discussed. And while it is only a figure of speech to regard human life or a person as a work of art, nevertheless a good personal life shares many characteristics with a good painting, poem, or musical composition. The same properties that make a work of art interesting to contemplate render an individual interesting to himself and to his fellows.

Our speech, clothing and demeanor are externals, which willynilly convert our persons to objects with aesthetic dimensions. Others are forced or invited to perceive them, and not the least contribution we can make to the happiness of mankind is to present an appearance pleasant to behold. A personality is satisfying, one might say, if it unifies a variety of experience by a dominant theme; if it is kept at a productive tension; if it springs pleasant surprises from time to time. Such a personality has what some aestheticians have called "significant form," a form that expresses something authentic and distinctive--in short, a real person.